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King Assassination

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) -- New arguments that Martin Luther King Jr.'s confessed killer was coerced into pleading guilty have an all too familiar ring, a judge said Tuesday.

"It seems those issues have been resolved by the state of Tennessee and then numerous appellate courts," Criminal Court Judge Joseph Brown said at a brief hearing on a petition to free James Earl Ray.

Brown also said the question of whether Ray's 1969 guilty plea was made freely must be resolved before his lawyers can present new evidence they say will prove his innocence.

He gave defense lawyers until Feb. 10 to offer new arguments proving the plea should be thrown out. New evidence that someone else took part in the crime, or even committed it, is not enough to release Ray from prison if his plea was freely given, Brown said.

Ray's lawyers filed a petition Monday seeking his release from the Nashville prison where he is serving a 99-year sentence.

The petition largely rests on a claim by former Memphis restaurant owner Loyd Jowers that a now-deceased business associate gave him the money to hire King's assassin, and that he hired someone other than Ray.

John Pierotti, the state prosecutor in Memphis, said reports of a contract killing involving Jowers were looked into and rejected when King's killing was first investigated.

He described Ray's petition as the "same old song and dance, same old dog and pony show."

"I don't have any question that Mr. Ray was guilty," he said.

King was shot to death in Memphis in 1968 as he stood on a balcony of The Lorraine Motel. He was in Memphis to help organize a strike by sanitation workers.

Ray, a drifter and small-time criminal, was arrested in London two months later. Although he pleaded guilty in 1969, he has said for more than 20 years that he was set up by a shadowy underworld figure he knew only as "Raoul."